

Against the Grain

Volume 23 | Issue 5

Article 43

November 2011

Technology Left Behind -- Redefining Our Borders

Cris Ferguson

Furman University, cferguson13@murraystate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Cris (2011) "Technology Left Behind -- Redefining Our Borders," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 23: Iss. 5, Article 43.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6017>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Technology Left Behind — Redefining Our Borders

Column Editor: **Cris Ferguson** (Electronic Resources/Serials Librarian, James B. Duke Library, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Highway, Greenville, SC 29613; Phone: 864-294-2713) <cris.ferguson@furman.edu>

In 1996, I graduated from college, a Theatre major with a paucity of marketable job skills. (Few employers were looking to hire a budding costume designer.) Unemployed and living in my parents' Atlanta, Georgia home, I found myself filling out an application at **Borders Books and Music**. After passing the **Borders** quiz (<http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/09/09/borders.quiz/index.html>), I was offered an entry-level position as a full-time bookseller, making \$6.00 an hour.

Over the course of the next two-and-a-half years, my job at **Borders** left an indelible print on my life and shaped my plans for the future. As a bookseller, I worked shifts at the information desk and the registers, and I was responsible for maintaining an assigned section of the store. I learned the **Borders** system of organization and inventory. I planned community events and managed book signings. I helped customers find the books and resources they didn't even know they needed. After a year with the company, I was promoted to store trainer and assumed the responsibility of training all new hires. In short, at **Borders** I became a librarian of sorts. It was because of my experiences at **Borders**, the things I learned and the work I did, that I went to library school in 1999.

Originally founded in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1971, at its peak **Borders** had more than 1,200 stores worldwide. At the beginning of 2011, faced with mounting debt, the company announced its intention to close a significant number of its retail stores and reinvent itself as a purveyor of eBooks and non-book options. Having failed to find a buyer, **Borders** received court approval in July to liquidate completely all 399 of its remaining stores. By the beginning of October, the company's physical presence was completely shut down and, while customers could order books from the **Borders** Website, all orders were being fulfilled by **Barnes and Noble**.

I joined **Borders** during its prime growth period, and I left long before its eventual decline. I have followed the decline and demise of my old employer over the course of the past year with some dismay, but mostly resignation. There are a myriad of reasons that **Borders** failed, but it is widely agreed that the single largest contributing factor to the company's collapse was the growth of the eBook market and **Borders'** failure to capitalize on market change. With a late entrance into online retailing and the eBook and e-reader market, **Borders** hammered more than one nail into its own coffin.

According to an article in the September 10, 2011 issue of *The Economist*, the sales of consumer eBooks in America overtook those of adult hardback books in the first five months of 2011, and **Amazon** now sells more copies of eBooks than paper books.¹ Showing a lack of foresight, **Borders** outsourced its Web sales and Internet operations to **Amazon** in 2001. The company did not resume control of its own Website until 2008.² While **Borders** announced

plans to carry the **Sony e-Reader** and build an online eBook store in 2008, it does not appear that much of anything came as a result of that agreement. It was not until the second quarter of 2010 that **Borders** entered into its partnership with **Kobo, Inc.** to provide e-readers and eBooks. That is three full years after **Amazon** debuted the **Kindle** in 2007, and one year after **Barnes and Noble's** release of **nook**.

In an editorial in *Publishers Weekly*, **Raymond Rose**, a former **Borders** employee, had this to say, "**Borders'** belated entrance into the eBook business only saddled its employees with unsellable and often faulty e-readers and drove customers away with a Website that moved at glacier speed and was about as easy to traverse as a minefield."³

Borders' closure has had a ripple effect throughout the publishing and bookselling industries, and many stakeholders are faced with new challenges as a result of the bookstore's shut down. One corner of the industry is already feeling the effects of **Borders'** exit. Publishers "rely heavily on bookstores to bring new releases to customers' attention and to steer them to books that they might not have considered buying. As stores close, the industry loses much more than a retail outlet."⁴ As a result, publishers have been forced to market their own books and find new avenues to make sales.

Smaller academic presses, in particular, have historically relied to some degree on the sales of the large chain stores to market and sell their books. According to a March 2011 piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "University Presses have to step up and do a lot of direct marketing to consumers, an effort that they used to count on booksellers to make."⁵ **John P. Hussey**, director of sales and marketing at the **University Press of Kentucky**, told the *Chronicle* that the press has relied on sales in state parks and gift shops and is also cultivating relationships with clothing stores and distilleries.

Borders' shutdown has not meant doom and gloom for everyone, though. One company in particular has actually benefited somewhat. "**Barnes & Noble** reported its best quarterly report in some time last week... The company believes it will generate an extra \$150 million to \$200 million in sales because of the collapse of **Borders**."⁶

However, the closing of the **Borders** stores is not expected to be a panacea for ailing independent bookstores, which compete with **Amazon**, **B&N.com** and other online booksellers. **Margot Sage-El**, owner of **Watchung Booksellers** in Montclair, NJ, noted to *Publishers Weekly* last February, "In the last few years it hasn't been the big-box stores that are a threat to us. We've co-existed peacefully. It's the online retailers."⁷

As a result, indie bookstores have had to think creatively to stay relevant. **Powell's Books**, a

Portland, Oregon based independent bookstore, is experimenting with digital integration in its physical stores to stay competitive. **Powell's** provides QR codes on their Website and a free app that "provides turn-by-turn directions to navigate the flagship store and locate a specific title."⁸ **Powell's** has offered eBooks for a number of years, and recently moved to **Google eBooks** because of its simplicity.

These days I rarely set foot in a physical bookstore, and, when I do, I do a lot of browsing and not a lot of purchasing. I own a **nook** color, and I download at least two or three eBooks a month. If I want a print book, I check it out from the library or order it on interlibrary loan. As a librarian, I have actively moved my institution towards the use of eBooks, marketing them to students and faculty alike. My library circulates **iPads** and **Kindles** to patrons. In short, I am exactly the kind of customer and reader that put **Borders** out of business. Or, better put, I am exactly the kind of customer and reader to which **Borders** should have catered.

I have always and will always think that, in its early years at least, **Borders** was a better bookstore than **Barnes and Noble**, and I am sad to see the company that put me on the path to librarianship go under. But as I have changed, so should they have changed. **Borders'** downfall was in its failure to adapt to the growing eBook market and its own changed circumstances in that market. It is a cautionary tale for all of us, I think. 🍁



Endnotes

1. "Great Digital Expectations: The books business," *The Economist* [US] 400, no. 8750 (September 10, 2011): 69-70, accessed October 5, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21528611>.
2. **Mike Spector** and **Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg**, "Borders Succumbs to Digital Era in Books," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 20, 2011, accessed October 5, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304567604576456430727129532.html>.
3. **Raymond Rose**, "Fatal Mistakes," *Publishers Weekly* 258, no. 31 (August 1, 2011): 52.
4. "Great Digital Expectations," *The Economist*.
5. **Jennifer Howard**, "As Borders Goes Bankrupt, Academic Presses Worry about Ways to Reach Readers," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 57, no. 27 (March 11, 2011): A13.
6. **Jim Milliot**, "Cashing In," *Publishers Weekly* (September 5, 2011): 4-5.
7. **Judith Rosen**, "A World with Fewer Borders," *Publishers Weekly* 258, no. 9 (February 28, 2011): 23.
8. **Judith Rosen**, "Lessons from Powell's Books," *Publishers Weekly* 258, no. 14 (April 4, 2011): 20.